

GRAY WOLF (TIMBER WOLF) STATUS IN IOWA 2001 to Present

Two large wolf-like mammals were frequently encountered by early settlers in Iowa. While Iowa was still part of the Louisiana Territory, in the early 1800s the very first piece of wildlife legislation was that to encourage killing wolves. Much of the legislation centered around bounties. There are no known specimens preserved in museums from the state. Historians usually did not distinguish between the gray (timber) wolf, *Canis lupus* and the coyote, *Canis latrans* often called the “prairie wolf.” Both species were greatly persecuted and until very recently, only the coyote remains and thrives in the state.

Two different subspecies of gray wolf occurred in Iowa. The Great Plains wolf (a name that causes considerable confusion because the coyote which was often given a similar name, (the prairie wolf) was found over the western two-thirds of the state. The Great Plains Wolf followed the bison herds, feeding on the stragglers from the herd as well as other prey (Dinsmore, 1994). The other subspecies was the gray (timber) wolf found primarily in eastern Iowa, especially in the wooded northeastern corner of the state. Gray wolves were likely extirpated by the late 1800s. Bowles (1971) regards the last valid wolf record to be from Butler County in the winter of 1884-85. A timber wolf taken in Shelby County in 1925 appeared to be wild, but it also could have escaped from captivity before being shot. Gray wolves often fed on the domestic animals that settlers brought to Iowa, and there are numerous reports of them killing chickens, pigs, calves, and sheep in Iowa. Gray wolves

were fully protected in all the 48 states in August of 1974 under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973.

Great Lakes Population of Gray Wolves

In 1978, they were reclassified (down-listed) from endangered to threatened under the ESA in Minnesota. The US Department of Interior’s Fish and Wildlife Service administers the ESA. The Fish and Wildlife Service is working to allow more state rights’ management of gray wolves and other resident species. Taking the gray wolf off the endangered/threatened list has continued to generate considerable controversy between wildlife professionals and animal rights’ activists. Public review and input of this effort continues.

Both Minnesota and Wisconsin were allowed to move forward with their first modern day wolf harvest season that first took place in the Fall/Winter 2012.

Rocky Mountain Population of Gray Wolves

The Rocky Mountain wolf population was delisted from threatened on July 18, 2008 which allowed them to be legally harvested with approved state management plans, however an injunction by animal rights activists placed them back on the Threatened List which in essence gave them protection again. Court disputes between activist groups, ranchers, and government agencies continued for the next few years.

THE GRAY (TIMBER WOLF) WAS OFFICIALLY DELISTED FROM ENDANGERED AND THREATENED ON MARCH 6, 2009. The back and forth between federal protection or delisting has continued since. However,

many western states now allow wolves to be readily killed if there is concern for the welfare of livestock. Numerous animals have, in fact, been taken since this occurred.

Gray Wolf Status in Iowa

Unlike the mountain lion and the black bear, the gray (timber) wolf is designated as a furbearer with state protected status under the Iowa Code. Gray wolves likely have protection status because they were not clearly separated from the coyote in early bounty legislation, while Mountain Lions and Black Bear had basically been extirpated before any wildlife legislation occurred. Thus wolves are listed as a furbearer under Iowa code and are protected by state law. We currently have a closed season but a gray wolf could be killed if it was causing livestock damage. When the Great Lakes population of gray wolves were listed as threatened and endangered by the US Fish and Wildlife Service they also had federal status in Iowa. Now that the northern great lakes population has recovered and been delisted there is no federal oversight or penalty.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, a few wolves were appearing in west-central Wisconsin and southeast Minnesota which is approximately 75 miles from the Iowa border (Figure 2). It's very likely major river corridors, especially the Mississippi River, in this tri-state region (MN, WI, IA) serve as travel corridors for wolves. Because this Driftless region is relatively rugged there is some habitat available that is conducive to wolves. It's not likely that wolves will visit Iowa often, nor in high numbers, however it is entirely likely for the occasional wolf to come down

into Iowa from Minnesota or Wisconsin (Figure 1).

In October of 2000, a radio collared wolf from Michigan was shot and killed near Kirksville, Missouri. This animal traveled over 600 miles (Straight line from where it was radio collared to where it was killed) and could have actually moved through a portion of Iowa before being killed in Missouri. Kirksville is located about 50 miles south of Bloomfield, IA.

On November 15, 2002, a wolf was shot in Houston County, Minnesota which is adjacent to Allamakee County, Iowa; the northeastern most county of Iowa. Rodney Rovang, manager of the Effigy Mounds National Monument near Marquette, Iowa, indicates that he has observed occasional wolf tracks in and near Allamakee County over the past decade.

Two known wolf-like animals were taken in 2010 in Sioux and Guthrie County.

Wolves are very mobile animals and as they extend their range southward more will likely frequent Iowa.

Plans are underway to revise Iowa's Gray Wolf Management Plan as required under the removal of the gray wolf from the Threatened list. Now that the gray wolf has been removed from the Threatened list in Minnesota, we are planning to revise the plan to accommodate the newly designated status of the gray wolf in the Midwest. The revised version will serve as a guide as to how the DNR should respond to wolf concerns as wolf numbers increase and human and wolf encounters occur.

During 2009 through 2012, a few reports have come from people seeing what they believed were gray wolves in Iowa on a more frequent basis but we

have not been able to validate their presence with any sort of solid evidence. For example, one (unconfirmed) report was in Jefferson County in July 2012.

2013

There were no confirmed reports of wolves in Iowa for 2013. However, there were some additional reports to the Iowa DNR that weren't able to be confirmed. Missouri and Illinois both reported 2 – 4 documented wolves in their states in 2013.

2014

So far in 2014, the Iowa DNR was able to confirm that two female wolves were shot and killed. One was shot in February in Buchanan County, the second was shot in Jones County. Both weighed close to 70 pounds and neither showed indications that they had welped. It is likely they were both 2 year olds based on tooth wear, body size, and other features. DNA evidence on one wolf indicated it matched somewhat with the Great Lakes population of wolves. It is likely both of these wolves travelled on their own into Iowa from

MN, WI, or MI. Missouri also reported a female gray wolf was shot in the south eastern part of the state in January 2014.

It is possible that we may continue to have a roving wolf move into or through our state on rare occasion, but it's important to understand that we don't have a breeding population at this time. Time will tell whether or not a breeding population of gray wolves will become established in Iowa. Because gray wolves, at a distance can be readily mistaken for coyotes or in some cases dogs, many reports will likely be cases of mistaken identity. Modern day coyote hunters should take extra care to identify their target before shooting because it's now possible (although the chances are small), that it could be a gray wolf.

Table 1. Public reports of wolf sightings in Iowa by year (2012 – 2014).

Year	Confirmed Wolf Sightings	Unconfirmed Wolf Sightings
2012	0	2
2013	0	1
2014	2	4
Total	2	7

A few unconfirmed wolves were reported for the years (1938 – 2012). Unconfirmed wolf sightings began being documented better in 2012 as shown in the table above.